


THE GOLDEN SERPENTS.

BY GEORGE E. HALL.

Greaser Beans Gave the Prospectors a Tip Which Led to Something Unusually Exciting.

 SEVERAL years ago I was sent by a syndicate of Eastern capitalists to look over a gold-mining concession in the State of Oaxaca, Mexico, which lies toward the southern end of the land of tamales and tortillas. The claim was in one of the foothills of the Sierra Madre, about twenty miles east of a little town called Octolán—a poor collection of flea-bitten huts and high-flavored greasers. I took with me five men who could shoot straight and stood for nothing that wore hide or hair, because, for some reason or other, *Americanos* didn't stand at par in those parts.

We made camp, and began to round up the necessary local help. At last we did manage to rope a cook and a sort of general help. The first was a queer little fellow, a new pattern of "greaser" to me. He was small, and had a head and face unlike any Mexican that I had ever met. That he wasn't pure Mexican I was positive, and that he wasn't the usual half-breed I was dead certain.

What he really was I couldn't make out, and he wouldn't tell, although I tried more than once to draw him out about himself. The most curious thing about him was his high, sloping forehead, and nose shaped just like an eagle's beak. He sometimes put on airs like a prima donna, and served our *chile con carne* as if he was doing us a great favor. Beans, we called him, for his real name had five syllables to start with and more to follow.

Our other belot, José, was just bad half-breed. Like all of his kind, he was a thief by nature. He did general chores, carried instruments, loafed when

he could, and ate and slept most of the time.

Beans seemed to take a liking to me from the start. His ways of showing this were various, including queer hot hashes and soups that he had made for me only. When work was over for the day, the little chap would squat contentedly as close to me as I'd let him, huddled up in his *serape*, and listen to yarns. The boys called him my "pet monk."

Beans when he liked would speak surprisingly pure Spanish, although he had a fair smattering of good English. Once or twice, too, I overheard him crooning a kind of chant in a tongue that was new to me. When I asked him what it was, he shut up hard and tight as a sun-dried steer hide.

The boys liked to have fun with Beans in their own way, and sometimes they'd go a trifle beyond. Then Beans would look appealingly at me—and I'd usually call a halt; not exactly because I was afraid he'd get hurt, but because he was a good cook and I didn't want him to quit. He didn't know this, however, and so would whisper his thanks in his musical lingo and stick closer than ever.

Between José and Beans there was bloody war all the time. The half-breed was everlastingly trying to raid the commissariat department when Beans wasn't looking; and when Beans would get wise, he'd go for José like mad.

One evening, when dinner was over, while Beans was busy cleaning up in a willow lean-to that served him as a kitchen and storeroom, José, trying to swipe some canned stuff, was pounced upon by the little cook. In an instant the pair—clawing, spitting and swearing—rolled out of the lean-to.

The moon was full—one of those big Mexican moons that makes the night almost as light as day. So we could see the little tragedy quite plainly without the need of footlights.

Suddenly Beans's single upper garment—the usual shirt-like affair of the poor Mexicans—was torn from the neck down by the infuriated José. As the garment parted, I saw Beans's hands release their grip on the throat of his opponent and fly to his own throat, covering it and the upper part of his chest with a sort of desperate eagerness.

As he did so, however, I caught sight of something yellow hanging from his throat, over which his hands snapped and remained. José, like myself, had evidently seen the thing; and while, with one hand, he tried to put Beans's Adam's apple out of place, with the other he tugged away at the cook's hands, evidently with the intention of getting at what was under them.

At this point poor Beans gave a gurgling cry for help, and I stopped the fight. José glared sullenly at me, and hesitated when I ordered him to release Beans and keep away from him, too. Then I helped the little chap to his feet. But his hands remained as they were, and he hurried away to his lean-to, muttering.

Beans didn't show up that night, contrary to his usual custom. José disappeared somewhere in the shadows, and he, too, was invisible for the rest of the evening. As for the rest of us, we had had a heavy day and a hearty meal, and we turned in somewhat earlier than usual.

Judging by the position of the moon, it must have been about two o'clock in the morning when I was awakened by a shrill scream, followed by another, and yet another. Swinging myself out of my hammock and taking my gun from the tent-pole, I ran in the direction of the sounds.

The moon threw the shadows of a clump of mesquit on Beans's lean-to; but in the midst of the darkness I could make out a confused, struggling mass, which separated itself as I came near into two men, one of whom made tracks in a way that justified me in blazing away at him. At the third shot I heard a groan from the darkness, which told me that one of

my bullets had found flesh. Then I turned my attention to the man still on the ground. It was Beans.

By this time the other boys were on hand; and we took Beans over to my tent, where we struck a light and looked him over. He was pretty badly done up. There were knife-marks over most of his face and chest, and from one ugly cut in the region of the right lung came little bubbles of blood. Beans was nearly all in.

"José!" I cried, pointing to his wounds.

"*Sí, señor,*" he said weakly, throwing up his hand.

"Allen," I said to my chief assistant, "I think I have plugged the half-breed out beyond the kitchen. Go look him up."

"And I'll get a rope," said one of the others.

Beans raised himself with an effort and beckoned me to put my ear close to him.

He spoke to me in Spanish. "*Señor,*" he said, "ask them all to go. I have something to tell you which no other must hear."

"Mean this, Beans?" I asked.

He nodded, and replied slowly: "I go—hence—pretty soon. I have no time for much talk. Hasten; send them away."

I did so; and Beans, between hacking coughs due to his injured lung, began:

"How I came here, *señor*, it is no matter. Who I am, though, concerns what I have to tell you. Listen. I am a descendant of the Incas. There are few, very few of us left, and none of us are of pure blood. But, nevertheless, we have that about us which makes us different from these—these Mexicans."

He spoke the last word with a sort of bitterness and contempt, while his left hand seemed unconsciously to stray over his face and head, as if these could attest that he was not of the race amid which he lived. "You will ask why I am here—in this region—or how I came here when my people, those who remain, are so distant?"

Although it is not generally known, there still live in a radius of thirty or forty miles of the city of Mexico, a half dozen or so families that claim descent

from the Incas. These people are mighty modest about their ancestors, and it is only when an outsider knows them more or less intimately, which is not often, that he gets an inkling of the fact that in their veins runs the ancient royal blue blood of an older race. You will understand, therefore, what poor Beans meant when he said that he was far from his people.

I wiped the blood from his mouth, placed him in as comfortable a position as I could, gave him another drink, and he continued:

"You are learned, *señor*, and, I have no doubt, know as much about the past of our people—the past that was before Spain destroyed them. When it was seen that destruction was sure, certain of the priests—they who guarded the treasures of our great temples—were given the golden serpents and told to hide them in a place known only to them and the chief of the temples.

"The golden serpents! What were they? I will tell you. The worshipers brought gold in those days in abundance to the temples as offerings to the priests and for beautifying the high places.

"Much of this gold was devoted to the gods, and to them only. It was fashioned by skilled workmen into serpents—beautiful, watchful—having crimson eyes. The Spaniards were many in the land, lying roundabout, watching lest any gold escape them, killing, crucifying, and burning those who ran counter to their cupidity.

"When the priests drew near to the hiding-place, they found that some traitor had told of it. They hastened to another hiding-place, but found the Spaniards awaiting them.

"Then the priests sent back runners to the chief, asking counsel. The chief replied, saying: 'Go far southward, where the curse of the Spaniard is yet unknown, and select a hiding-place. Tell none where the serpents lie hidden, save three, chosen by you.

"Give each of these three one of the golden serpents to protect them from the invaders. If a custodian of a serpent die, he shall will the serpent in his charge to another, and so on through the ages, until the time for the annihilation of the invaders shall come.'

"One of these serpents has been passed down to me."

Another fit of coughing seized Beans, and I thought that he would breathe his last; but he revived, and, extending his left hand, which all this time had remained tightly closed, opened it and showed me a little pouch made of what was apparently golden scales.

"Open it, *señor*," he gasped.

I did so, and inside I saw the snake, which is now on my fob, and a small, tightly folded piece of what appeared to be deerskin.

"Unroll," whispered Beans. I obeyed. The skin was about six inches square, and on it was traced a rude map.

"The priests journeyed on and on," went on Beans feebly, "until they came to a spot about five miles from where we now are. The map tells.

"It was to get this map and the serpent that José stabbed me. See! Here on the map. Go east—to the river that wets the foot of the hill of two heads. And thou shalt cross the river beneath the shadow of the heads. So, climbing, thou shalt pass up to and between them and descend to the other side, and there rest.

"And the morning following, rise before the sun shows above the hills across the valley, and watch. And presently thou shalt see the tip of one rock on the farther side of the valley turn into blood beneath the sun—one rock and no other. Go thither—to the rock—and behind it, and hidden by it, thou shalt find a stream, because at the point of its issuance it falls into a basin studded with pointed rock.

"It is known as the Basin of the Spear Heads. Now, go up the stream—a mile or more—until thou comest to Painted Rock on the north bank. And in the rock, and hidden, as it were, by a rock door, is a hole that leads into a cave—the dwelling-place of the serpents.

"Take this, the snake here, with thee, placing it on thy breast, thus. When my people ask, give them the gold that you find there—they will—"

Beans raised himself, touched my hands, choked, and fell back dead.

Just as I laid the body of the poor little chap in my hammock, I heard a slight noise from the other side of the tent, and, looking up, saw the face of

José peering through the flap. He disappeared before I had a chance to take a shot at him; but, as I dashed toward him I heard the boys returning from the opposite direction.

We put in an hour or two trying to round-up that half-breed, but were unsuccessful. I had, though, an uneasy conviction that José had overheard some or all of Beans's talk about the serpents. Then I told the others what had happened, and after a talk which lasted well on toward dawn, we turned in, determined to test the truth of Beans's story.

It took us nearly three days to locate the hill described by Beans, and another day in getting at the whereabouts of the little stream, Painted Rock, and the covered hole. The stream was low at the time, and we had no difficulty in wading to where the tall rock, with its strata of brilliant color, stood out boldly and abruptly in the little cañon through which the water ran.

Near the rock, the stream channel dropped a little, or rather, the rock face retreated so as to leave a sort of rough pathway. Suddenly Jack Winstead, one of our party, stopped and held up his hand warningly. Then he beckoned me and pointed to something on the bank.

I could see nothing.

"Somebody has been here before us," he whispered. "See the signs?"

I looked closely, and saw that Winstead's keen eye had detected some bruised blades of grass, broken twigs, and displaced pebbles.

"Hold the rest of the boys together while I look this thing over." He proceeded cautiously to follow the path for a few feet, nosing it like a hound that is on a hot scent.

Then he returned to us.

"It is an Injun that has been here; foot signs show that," he muttered. "Judging by the looks of things ahead, this is the only path to and from the hole."

I saw what he meant. Beyond the rock the path ceased, and the cliff face extended indefinitely onward, the water washing its foot as far as we could see.

"Who ever went up there has not come back," continued Winstead, "and the probability is that he is in the hole now."

He loosened his revolver from its holster, the others followed suit, and thus we crept cautiously toward the hole, which was partly hidden by a rock fragment or door and a growth of tall weeds. As we drew near, we heard, rising above the rattle and ripple of the stream, a choking noise.

However, there was no stopping, and so I led the way. Not without an effort of will, I parted weeds in front of the mouth of the hole and looked in.

I shall never forget the sight just inside the entrance. José was standing upright, his naturally swarthy face a dirty yellow with agony and fear, his eyes protruding, his mouth open, from which were issuing the rattling screams that we had just heard. But about his body, and from his ankles almost to his neck, was twined an enormous snake, whose scales shone with a kind of vivid yellow metallic glitter, such as I had never before seen on a reptile.

As I looked, José, with a final, despairing effort, got the thing by its throat, so as to prevent it from completing its final and fatal coil around his neck. So they stood, the frightful reptile with its mouth wide open, hissing and glaring into the eyes of the man, who in turn glared back at it with eyes that were barely less horrible than its own.

Paralyzed at the sight, none of us moved for a second or two. Then Winstead drew his revolver. As he did so, José's arms relaxed, and like a flash the snake twisted itself around his throat. We could see a ripple of muscular effort run through its body. Blood issued from the half-breed's mouth, nose, and eyes. There was a horrible crunching sound, and snake and man fell to the ground.

We opened fire on the reptile, but, with incredible swiftness, it uncoiled itself and disappeared in the inner recesses of the little cavern, apparently unharmed, leaving the crushed body of its victim within a few feet of us.

"What is the cursed thing, anyhow?" Winstead whispered huskily. "The boas you get in the Brazils and down around those parts don't come so far north as this. That snake, too, ain't any kind that grows in Mexico."

We were silent at least a quarter of

an hour or so, each trying to think out the next thing to be done. One thing was certain: we had to get the body of José out of the cave and give it decent burial. With the sweat of fear trickling down us, we began our unpleasant task. The long one with the yellow scales we knew was somewhere hidden in the cavern.

"Well, boys," I said, when we had finished planting the unlucky man, "what next?"

"Back to camp for mine," said Allen, who was as vacillating a proposition as ever looked through the sights of a Colt. "I allow I ain't a cravin' no more horrors."

I was rousing glad that the boys weren't ardent on going back to the cave, for my nerves were twittering like a prairie-dogs' parliament.

So back to camp we got. None of us could eat, and we turned in early. Also, we turned out early, for that night the heavens opened and the rain descended and the bottom fell out of a year-ahead supply of wind, thunder, and lightning, which we caught all at once.

When the weather did let up, the first thing we did was to start for Painted Rock. It took us nearly three days to reach our objective, the delay being caused by the fact that a lot of usually insignificant creeks and streams had swelled themselves up to an unfordable stage. So we had to wait till they shallowed up.

When we finally fetched up to the point where our streams fell into the Hole of the Spear Heads, the latter was chock-full of débris. The bed of the stream, too, was pretty well chock-a-block with stuff that didn't belong there. The banks on either side showed the height and the torrential force of the water during the storm.

We found the mouth of the hole packed tight with a tangle of reeds, small trees, and mud. It took hours to blast the entrance clear. I crawled inside. The others came behind, each with his Winchester and a couple of blazing candles.

The cave rose abruptly right from the mouth of the hole, till we couldn't see the roof. It ended as abruptly in a flat rock face in which were the three openings, or fissures, six or seven feet in

height and about three feet in width. Their floors sloped sharply downward, and their walls were curiously carved into all sorts of fantastic shapes, apparently by the action of the water.

Taking a candle from one of the men, I stepped inside the center opening. A sparkle came from beyond. It was the reflection of the candle flame in a mirror of water near my feet.

Allen, behind me, grunted. "Plumb full of water. No need of snakes to keep them other snakes safe," he said, and stepped back into the cave.

Winstead uncoiled a light lariat from his shoulders, snared a rock in the loop and threw it into the blackness. There was an echoing splash and the line drew tight.

"Boys," he said, "there's twenty-five feet of moistness in them depths below, and how many more feet is uncertain. The total width of this stray limb of river is unknown."

It was too true. There was nothing to do but pack up and get back to camp to think the matter over and decide on our future course.

The morning following, three of us didn't get up to breakfast. We laid in our hammocks and gabbled about Heaven knows what. We had what the Mexicans call "storm fever." It's due to cold, exposure, and the miasma bred of wet and decaying vegetation.

Well, there happened along another Yankee outfit, bound for a concession located not far from ours. In this outfit was a doctor, and he gave me the choice of dying or getting out of the region. I chose the last.

A year later, in Houston, Texas, I was thinking over the possibility of organizing an expedition to visit Painted Rock, when, to my surprise, I ran up against Winstead.

Winstead grinned as he shook my hand.

"I know that you'll ask particulars about that Painted Rock and them snakes," he said. "But they ain't no more."

"What!" I cried.

"Nope. The Sierra Madres is always uneasy in their innards, and a month or so after you left us, they kind of spasmed into our neighborhood, shaking the circumjacence to smithereens."